

**E**LLEN H. was ten years old, and an only child. From infancy she had been given her own way; was, in fact, a typical "spoiled child." Naturally enough, she regarded the household as established to minister to her whims.

Conceive her astonishment, then, on being told one morning that she could not be granted her desire to accompany her parents on a shopping expedition. They had an excellent reason for leaving her at home, and for not telling her why they did so. It was Christmas time. But little Ellen flew into a rage at their refusal. She wept, she implored. When finally the door closed behind them she wept more bitterly than before, and—poor, foolish child!—said to herself:

"I'll make them sorry for this! They'll never have another chance to treat me this way!"

Then she went to the bath-room, took from the medicine cupboard a bottle labeled "Carbolic Acid—Poison," and drank from it enough to doom her to a painful death.

Frank W., twelve years old, was not an only child. On the contrary, he was one in a large family of children, whose parents were hard-working people. Frank, even as a small child, was inclined to be wild and unruly. He made trouble in school, frequently played truant, and eventually took to thieving.

This soon brought him into the grasp of the law, and earned for him a sentence to an industrial school. Bitterly he declared he would never go there.

"I would rather be dead," he cried, "than be sent to the Industrial!"

Thinking nothing of his words, the police locked him in a cell. When they next visited him they found he had made a rope from bed sheeting, and hanged himself to a stovepipe.

Joseph B. was an attendant in a departmental library connected with one of the large Eastern universities. He was between sixteen and seventeen years old, but looked younger: a quiet, earnest lad, capably attentive to his duties.

The only peculiarity I noticed in him on my occasional visits to the library was that I never saw on his face the faintest semblance of a smile. But, despite his habitual grimness of appearance, there was nothing really queer in his behavior.

One morning toward the close of the college year he ate his breakfast as usual, said good-by to his mother, and started, as she thought, for the library. Two hours later, happening to go into the cellar of their house, she was horrified to find him hanging lifeless from a gas-pipe.

To this day the mystery of his suicide remains unsolved. So far as is known it was absolutely without a motive.

This whole problem of "child suicide" is indeed a puzzling one to psychologists and educators. And—especially if we include in it, as most investigators do, all suicides occurring before the age of twenty—it is a far more serious problem than most people imagine. Many persons have an impression that children never commit suicide. It was only yesterday that an official of Massachusetts, to whom I spoke on the subject, said scornfully:

"Child suicide? There is no such thing!"

Yet at that very moment, not five miles away, men were dragging a pond for the body of a twelve-year-old self-slayer.

In this case the little victim had been hurried to his sad end



# The Child Who Kills Himself

By H. ADDINGTON BRUCE

by the unconscious cruelty of other children. Disfigured by a birthmark that had caused one of his lips to swell, he had been laughed and jeered at from the day he first went to school. The climax to his misery came when a teacher reprimanded him for some fault. Promptly he disappeared, and the first inkling of his fate was had when his cap was found floating at the edge of the near-by pond from which his body was afterward recovered.

## Largest Number in Prussia

**N**OT only is child suicide of more frequent occurrence than is generally supposed, but it seems to be increasing in all civilized countries. Of particular interest at the present time is the fact that statistics indicate that it has increased most rapidly in France, Russia, and Germany; and that in Germany its greatest increase is in Prussia, the land of the Hohenzollerns.

In France children under sixteen years of age are committing suicide at the rate of 150 a year. In Prussia, we are told by one authority, "suicide has become so common among school children that the State Department of Education has been forced to take cognizance of the evil by requiring careful investigation by the local authorities of every school suicide, and a detailed report of the case to the National Department of Instruction."

In Prussia thirty years ago the average yearly number of suicides of children under fifteen was 35. Now it is between 85 and 90. The total for 1911 (the latest year for which I have statistics) was 87. And in that same year nearly 700 young Prussians between fifteen and twenty years old killed themselves.

## Fewer Child Suicides in This Country

**I**N our own country, according to available figures, the situation is much better. The latest mortality statistics of the Census Bureau show that in 1913 no children under ten killed themselves in the United States, that there were only 32 suicides less than fifteen years old, and that the total for the ages of fifteen to nineteen was 375. This, however, indicates a marked increase in recent years; for in the census year 1900 there were only 226 suicides of fifteen to nineteen.

It must also be remembered that for various reasons many juvenile suicides are not reported as such. This of course means considerable under-enumeration, and may even justify the estimate of one statistician (Lewis M. Terman) who, dismissing the official statistics as quite unreliable, gives 500 as the probable yearly total of American suicides under fifteen.

Whatever the accuracy of this latter figure, child suicide is sufficiently prevalent in the United States to make the question of its prevention urgently important.

Child suicide differs from the suicide of adults in one significant respect—it usually is the result of a momentary impulse. Moreover, in a great majority of cases it is clearly traceable, not to any inherited "brain taint," but to faulty upbringing in the matter of self-control.

That a certain proportion of child suicides are the victims of an organic brain defect, inherited or acquired, can not be denied. In such cases the suicide is the outcome of an irresistible impulsion originating in the diseased brain, and depends on no external cause whatever. To this class prob-

ably belongs the suicide of the young library attendant.

This, however, is a distinctly exceptional case. The case of Ellen H., given in my opening paragraphs, is, on the contrary, typical of most suicides of young children. There is no deliberation, but an instantaneous resolution, followed by immediate execution of the act. The reason is often absurdly trivial.

I know of one case in which a little boy killed himself because his mother refused to buy him a squirrel he had seen in a store window. Another committed suicide because his pet bird had died. A third ended his life in a fit of rage at having been sent to bed without his supper.

In this third case a rankling sense of injustice was an additional factor, it being the mother's custom to deal harshly with the boy for any misconduct, while she usually overlooked his sisters' faults.

## The Youngest Suicide

**S**OMETHING of the same sort was evidence in the case of the youngest child suicide that has come to my knowledge.

Here the little victim was a boy only three years old. He had been playing on the floor with a younger brother, and the two started quarreling. At this moment their mother came into the room, carrying a foot-bath tub filled with boiling water. She set this down, lifted the younger boy in her arms, kissed away his tears, and rebuked his brother severely.

The latter, in a sudden frenzy of rage, did not hesitate an instant, but flung himself into the tub of boiling water. He was so badly scalded that he soon died.

Rage, grief, jealousy, desire for revenge—these, then, are motives conspicuously operative in causing child suicide. Even more frequent, however, are fear of punishment and a feeling of humiliation. In an analysis of the suicides of 1100 German school children, Professor Eulenberg of Berlin found that nearly 400 were due either to fear of punishment, or to humiliation at inability to keep up with the school work.

## "College Suicides"

**T**HE feeling of humiliation at mental backwardness becomes an increasingly frequent cause of suicide among the young in proportion as the age increases. Most "college suicides," it is safe to say, have this as their cause. Consequently investigators are almost a unit in indicating the school system as exacting too much, and dealing too severely with laggards.

Personally, I must confess to a belief that this throwing of the blame on the schools is not wholly justified. In the last analysis it surely is a question, not so much of modifying school methods in favor of weaklings, as of equipping the weaklings to do better work in school; and, what is fully as important, stiffening their moral fiber so that they will not seek the coward's haven of suicide.

This, I can not insist too emphatically, is a task that should be undertaken long before they reach school age.

Bearing in mind that, at an outside estimate, not more than ten per cent. of child suicides are associated with some irremediable brain defect, bearing in mind also that emotional impulsiveness and over-excitability account for virtually all the rest, it is obvious that the first step in prevention is the establishment of emotional control.

It is a cardinal principle of modern educational psychol-

ogy that the influences to which a child is exposed during his first years count for much in the making or marring of his whole career.

For this reason the modern psychologist of the most progressive school urges all parents to lose not a moment in providing their children with an environment that will, on the one hand, stimulate them to think clearly and energetically, and on the other hand that will develop in them the virtues of courage, calmness, and self-reliance.

But it is not primarily a matter of exhorting and instructing them; it is a matter, rather, of educating them through a subtle appeal to that most powerful of all their instincts, the instinct of imitation, which is grounded in their extreme suggestibility. Because this instinct is so strong in children, and is known in some cases to be directly responsible for child suicide, authorities like Eulenberg and Terman advocate safeguarding the child from suggestive stories and pictures of self-murder. But this negative precaution is not enough. In fact, it is much more important to utilize the instinct of imitation to establish settled modes of conduct that will render such a precaution entirely unnecessary.

To this end the one essential thing is for parents, through their own behavior, to set before their children an example of the qualities they wish them to acquire.

Do they wish their children to acquire emotional control? Then they must show themselves masters of their own emotions,

restraining anger, impatience, worry, discordant thinking of all kinds. Do they wish their children to be intellectually strong, alert, and industrious? Then they must give them the example of effective diligence. Always they must keep in mind that, in the words of a wise old pedagogue of a hundred years ago, "Though instruction begins, it is example that accomplishes."

In a statement that ought to be taken to heart by every parent, Dr. Paul Dubois, the famous psychologist and philosopher, says:

"Example is the means of education *par excellence*. You, madam, who complain of the irritability of your little girl, could you not suppress your own, which I have seen break out in a few words, exchanged with your dear husband immediately afterward? You, sir, who bitterly reproach your son for his impulsiveness and instability of temper, have you not these faults yourself? He so much resembles you in the face that I would be astonished if you had not transmitted your weaknesses to him. Where, indeed, would he get them, if not from you, from his ancestors, and from the education which he has received? Remember the proverb, 'The fruit does not fall far from the tree.'"

Always, too, parents must reckon not only with the extreme suggestibility of childhood, but with its extreme sensitiveness. They must govern their children through love, not through fear. Fear is by far the greatest source of nervous instability, and it is only the nervously unstable child who becomes a suicide. But the love shown must never be excessive or partial. When there are several children in a family, there must be no favoritism. When, on the opposite, it is a question of dealing with an only child, good sense must moderate the natural tendency to indulgence.

